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## V.—LESSING'S TREATMENT OF THE STORY OF THE RING, AND ITS TEACHING.

In Westermann's *Monatshefte* for January, 1891, and later in his '*Life of Lessing*,' Professor Erich Schmidt has outlined the chief features of the history and transformations of the story of the three rings in Europe. On examination it will be found that all the versions of the story belong to one or the other of two types, which are represented by the two earliest forms of the story preserved to us. The oldest version, that of the Spanish Jew Salomo ben Verga, tells of two rings or jewels only, which were in outward appearance exactly alike, and there is no question of one being genuine and the other false, but only of the relative value of the two. In the absence of the father it is found impossible to decide the question, and thus the decision between Christianity and Judaism is simply avoided. In *Li Dis dou vrai aniel*, a French poem of the end of the twelfth century, three rings appear, and to the original or genuine ring is attributed a marvelous healing power by which it may be recognized, and following which a decision is arrived at among the three religions, in this case in favor of Christianity, although there were not wanting later narrators so bold as to hint that the true ring was possessed by Judaism. The version of Etienne de Bourbon, the versions of the *Cento Nouvelle*, the three versions of the *Gesta Romanorum*, all belong to one or the other of two types. We may refer to these two types as the Spanish type and the French type. Those of the first type, to which belongs also the version of Boccaccio, the one from which Lessing took his point of departure, avoid a decision, implying that all religions are equally authoritative, but without inherent or inner evidence of their quality. Those of the second type, to which in many of its features Lessing's final version of the story is allied, lead to a decision, making

religion of divine origin indeed, but supplying a test, that of good works, whereby the true religion may be recognized.

The Spanish type of the story makes religion a matter of authority from without, but results in a doctrine of toleration. The French type teaches that religion is largely a matter of life and character, but in its final interpretation leads to intolerance. Neither of these types could satisfy Lessing. This we know from his utterances in a score of connections, but most clearly from *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts*. However, the ring story to be used by him in *Nathan*, must represent the same notions of religion as those expressed elsewhere in the drama. For the ring story is itself in the drama like the setting in a ring. The drama would be a drama, and a very good one, without the story. The purpose of scenes 4 to 7, act III in the economy of the drama, which is to relieve Saladin's financial distress, to bring Nathan and Saladin closer together, and to give Nathan an opportunity to recall the Templar to Saladin's attention, could be accomplished quite easily, though of course not so beautifully, by giving a different turn to Saladin's approach and omitting the ring story. A good jeweler could make us an excellent plain gold ring without the setting.

But having the setting, it must fit the ring and harmonize with it. We may be sure, on artistic grounds alone, that the notions of religion set forth in the body of the drama will be confirmed by the teaching of the ring story as the author will remodel it. What, then, are these notions?

Each of the three religions has its representatives, who are more or less admirable. No one of the religions would be condemned if judged by the character of its representatives. It makes no difference, in this connection, that some are more admirable than others, or which religion those more admirable characters represent, or whether Lessing had personally a preference among them. We know the special considerations which led him to make his most ideal character a Jew. The fact remains that, judged by their representatives in the play

alone, we must conclude that there is much good in all religions. Moreover we find these representatives engaged in chivalrous coöperation toward a good end, and finally united in one happy family.

Furthermore, we have the evidence of the direct utterances of the leading personages on the subject of religion. The doctrine of miracles and special intervention is gently put away in the first act. A religion of deeds, "gut handeln," is set over against a religion of pious gush, "andächtig schwärmen." The desire to claim the one exclusive, true religion is denounced in many different ways: by the non-sectarian Recha, "Wem eignet Gott? Was ist das für ein Gott, Der einem Menschen eignet?" by a Christian, "die fromme Raserei den bessern Gott zu haben," by a Mussulman, "Ihr Stolz ist, Christen sein, nicht Menschen," while to the Jew, in practice, "Jud' und Christ und Mussulmann und Parsi sind ihm alles eins." The Jew proclaims, furthermore, "dass alle Länder gute Menschen tragen," and urges: "Nur muss der Knorr den Knubben hübsch vertragen." The best representative of Christianity acknowledges Nathan as a Christian because of his manifestation of the spirit of Christ, while the Jew responds:

"Wohl uns, denn was  
Mich euch zum Christen macht, das macht euch mir  
Zum Juden."

Finally, the form of the religion, the creed, is subordinated in the doctrine taught to Recha by Nathan,

"dass Ergebenheit  
In Gott von unserm Wännen über Gott  
So ganz und gar nicht abhängt."

It is plain enough from these few references, which might be greatly increased, that the very heart and crown of this play could not be a parable which would present religion, on

the one hand, as a cold matter of form and authority, nor again, on the other, as the exclusive possession of one race or sect. Let us now consider how Lessing solved his difficulty and harmonized his two model types.

According to the oldest source of the ring story, that of the Spanish Jew, Salomo ben Verga, there is no question of a genuine or a false ring, but only of the relative value of two jewels given by a loving father. As applied to the religions regarding which Pedro of Aragon asks, the lesson is merely that only God can estimate the relative value of Christianity and Judaism, without any implication that one is false and the other true.

In the *Dis dou vrai aniel*, where first we find the suggestion of one true ring and beside it two false ones, the true ring having an innate healing power, the application teaches :

(1) That a religion is known by its results, good works, although depending for its power on a gift from above, that is, that it is a matter of special revelation.

(2) Accordingly, that there is and can be but one true religion, which will show the works (declared in the *Dis* to be Christianity), while the false ones will be barren of good works.

(3) The absence of good works among the claimants for the inheritance—that is, the true religion—would warrant only one conclusion : that the religions represented are all false, though there must still somewhere be a true one.

(4) The teaching is, therefore : Christianity is the true religion ; all religions are equally shams if they are not marked by the good works ; and the tendency is, until the application is made, to inculcate in the adherents of any given religion a sort of fatalistic indifference to the question, Who has the genuine religion ? since some *one* is by the gift of God true, and the status of none can be altered by human efforts,—a tolerance of indifference ; but when, as in the close of the *Dis*, it is declared that Christianity has the true ring, the teaching is *anything but toleration*.

In the type of the ring story as found in Boccaccio, which Lessing confesses to be his source, there is indeed an original ring, but recognizable only through the father's intention; consequently, when the father has determined to avoid discriminating between the brothers, there is no room for a question as to true and false,—the ring is a mark of the father's favor, and this is shared by the brothers alike.

The application teaches :

(1) That religion is a matter of revelation, a gift of God, of authority from on high.

(2) And further, that God has expressed his equal approbation of the three religions under consideration, since he has given to all alike revelations and refused to discriminate between them.

(3) Consequently, that there can be no claim supported on behalf of one sect that it has the true religion while the others are false.

(4) The teaching is therefore : the adherents of any one of the three religions are justified in holding to their own, but should at least tolerate the adherents of the others, for theirs also are God-given.

While Lessing informs us that he built his treatment upon that of Boccaccio, we know that he was familiar also with the *Gesta Romanorum*. The attribution of marvelous powers to the ring was in Lessing's sources, therefore, and in fact he follows in essentials the French rather than the Spanish type.

Lessing combines features of both these types, and adds others which quite transform the fable and shift the original ground of it. He attributes to the original ring a marvelous power, as in the fables of the French type, but makes the power dependent on the faith of the wearer, instead of innate as in the case of the French version of the *Dis dou vrai aniel*. Here, then, there is one true ring, which may or may not prove itself the true one, and two others which are not genuine. Inasmuch as Lessing does not carry the fable out to its con-

clusion on this basis, it will suffice to point out that the conclusions would be :

The religion typified would be a religion conferred from above, but maintained only by trust in God, and recognizable only through its works.

That there may be one true religion, but only one ; but also, that there may be none at all.

The teaching to the claimants would be : yours may turn out to be the true religion ; believe that you are beloved by God and man, and if as a result you are, then you have the true religion. But only one of you has it. The effect on the believers would be at first to make them amiable and tolerant, but as soon as evidences of popularity were discovered to make them intolerant. It might also lead to fatalistic inactivity and perversions of the doctrine of the might of Faith.

However, Lessing had no thought of stopping in any such half-way house. We know well enough the goal at which he is aiming. He intends to lead us out into a world in which there is room for three true religions, or for any number of them. Why then did he not stop with the simple version of Boccaccio, which puts the religions upon a par, instead of taking up that type of the story which carries the assumption of one true ring ? For it was against this

"fromme Raserei  
Den bessern Gott zu haben, diesen bessern  
Der ganzen Welt als besten aufzudringen,"

that he was most vigorously protesting.

It was because Lessing could not be satisfied with a religion of authority alone, and verifiable only by appeals to inspired documents. To him religion was a matter of the life of the believer, and hence the ring with the power of manifestation was a better representative of the religion he wished to advocate.

The difficulty now becomes to suppress the element of the one genuine ring. This cannot be done absolutely without making the choice of the parable seem absurd and unjustified. But not the least admirable piece of Lessing's dialectic cunning is the manner in which he conceals this defect in his parable and leads the reader's thoughts away from it. To begin with, the power to make beloved depends upon the faith of the wearer. When, at the end of the first paragraph of the ring story, the rule of succession is stated, the magic power and the faith in it are not mentioned, but "in Kraft allein des Rings" the claimant is to become the prince, the head of the house. Thus we are led to think only of the possession of a ring. Next, as in Boccaccio's version, the intent of the father is to put the sons upon an equal footing, and he provides rings exactly alike, apparently believing that he has thus secured his sons against rivalry and discrimination. The sons claim the inheritance, and again, as in Boccaccio, there is no means of deciding, and the story seems to be ended with the conclusion that there is no way of discriminating between the rival religions. There follows the little diversion in which religions are discussed directly, and not by means of a parable, and then Nathan resumes the story in order to carry it out to the beautiful moral he has in mind. The judge before whom the claims are being tried finally recalls the marvelous power of the ring to make its wearer beloved (though he omits the clause "Wer in dieser Zuversicht ihn trug"); and we have become so used to the thought that the rings are all alike that we are prepared to discover the power in any or all of them.

The judge then gives the *coup de grâce* to the notion of a single true ring by suggesting that it may have been lost, and that the father had had three new rings made in place of one. Having thus established the three rings on a parity, he recalls the original condition on which the ring manifested its power, by advising *each* to *believe* that he has the true ring, and admonishes all three of the sons to strive to demonstrate this power in themselves. Thus we are prepared for that appeal



to the universal qualities of pure and undefiled religion which have been recognized as the essentials by the great minds—and perhaps by most common minds, too—in all times.

“Komme dieser Kraft mit Sanftmut,  
Mit herzlicher Verträglichkeit, mit Wohlthun,  
Mit innigster Ergebenheit in Gott  
Zu Hülff!”

How like the creed of the prophet Micah that sounds: “What else doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with thy God!” Or that of Jesus: “Love the Lord thy God with all thy might and with all thy heart and with all thy mind, and thy neighbor as thyself.” And even though it is necessary to return to the contest for the inheritance in court, the postponement of the decision until eternity (über tausend tausend Jahre) beneficently reduces to the vanishing point the fact that we set out on the assumption that there was one true ring, which even if it was lost as among the three sons might turn up in the hands of a finder.

With the two types thus blended into one, we have to deal with three rings, all alike having the potentiality of developing the power to make beloved, and hence: three rings, (a) all genuine, or (b) one or more genuine, or (c) all false, or again, (d) one or all partly genuine.

(1) The religion thus typified is not a possession, but a capacity, bestowed by God on all his children alike, which may be developed or neglected.

(2) Thus there may be (a) one, or (b) any number of true religions, or (c) none at all, or, more reasonably, (d) any number of more or less genuine religions, the test of genuineness being in the spirit and the works; and the expectation of perfection, in this, as in other human institutions, being postponed to eternity.

(3, 4) The teaching of the parable in this form is: accept your inherited religion, or develop the capacity within you

as you will; cultivate this capacity to your utmost and encourage your brethren in other sects to do the same. If you have the right spirit you will be loved by the followers of other religions instead of being found contending with them in envious rivalry; intolerance will indeed be impossible towards those who are endowed by God with the same ideal capacity as yourselves, but the cold word toleration, the spirit of let-alone, will be an utterly inadequate expression of your attitude toward the adherents of other religions. Regarding them as the children of a common father, you will feel toward them the most hearty and active good will—not the Confucian, “Do not to others what you would not have them do to you,” but the Christian precept of the positive Golden Rule, “Do unto others as you would have them do to you.”

There has not been a proper recognition of the positive Christian teaching of *Nathan der Weise* on the part of the popular exponents of German literature. It is quite probable that Lessing himself would not have professed it to be such. Herder and Goethe have been echoed by a large number of commentators and popular critics. Herder found in the drama “einen reichen Kranz von Lehren der schönsten Art, der Menschen- Religion- und Völkerduldung. Alle rufen uns zu: ihr Völker, duldet euch!” Goethe commended to the German people “das darin enthaltene Duldungs- und Schonungsgefühl.” Following these inadequate estimates of the essence of the drama Lowell called it “an essay on toleration in the form of a dialogue,” and even Professor Erich Schmidt, who has caught and expounded better than anybody else the true beauty of the teaching, relapses into the same expression, “Lessings Toleranzpredigt.”

Of our American editors, Brandt uses Lowell's phrase slightly modified; Primer and Curme seem to me to have the truth in mind, but do not emphasize it adequately.

Scherer recognizes that Lessing has made of the ring story “aus einem Symbol des Indifferentismus oder der Toleranz

ein Symbol der Humanitätsreligion ;” but if by “Humanitätsreligion” Scherer refers to Positivism, there is still lacking the recognition of the spirit of active and helpful love. Schmidt, however, is clear and explicit when he speaks of *Nathan der Weise* as “das in ein Schauspiel gekleidete Evangelium der Liebe.”

The militant orthodoxy of the eighteenth century could not perceive in its adversaries, through the lurid clouds of theological conflict, the very teachings of the Master in whose name it fought. But the orthodoxy of to-day has occupied the redoubts held by the rationalism and heterodoxy of the eighteenth century. Samuel Reimarus would himself recognize that the world of to-day is ready for his *Schutzschrift für die vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes*. The Wolfenbüttel Fragments would scarcely arouse a controversy in the last year of the nineteenth century.

There is no need to apologize for the teaching of *Nathan der Weise*. On the contrary, the drama deserves to be accepted as one of the indispensable aids to a liberal education, as putting forth, in the most attractive and insinuating form, the principles of pure Christianity.

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